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WERE IT UP TO ME TO BEGIN AGAIN

Were it up to me to begin again, I would make the same choice. Roses on the fence.

I would travel the same roads that might or might not lead to Cordoba.

I would lay my shadow down on two rocks, so that birds could nest on one of the boughs.

I would break open my shadow for the scent of almond to float in a cloud of dust
and grow tired on the slopes. Come closer, and listen.

Share my bread, drink my wine, don't leave me alone like a tired willow.

I love lands not trod over by songs of migration, or become subject to passions of blood and
desire.

I love women whose hidden desires make horses put an end to their lives at the threshold.

If I return, I will return to the same rose and follow the same steps.

But never to Cordoba.

WE TRAVEL LIKE ALL PEOPLE

We travel like everyone else, but we return to nothing. As if travel were
a path of clouds. We buried our loved ones in the shade of clouds and between roots of trees.

We said to our wives: *Give birth for hundreds of years, so that we may end this journey
within an hour of a country, within a meter of the impossible!*

We travel in the chariots of the Psalms, sleep in the tents of the prophets, and are born again in
the language of Gypsies.

We measure space with a hoopoe's beak, and sing so that distance may forget us.

We cleanse the moonlight. Your road is long, so dream of seven women to bear
this long journey on your shoulders. Shake the trunks of palm trees for them.

You know the names, and which one will give birth to the Son of Galilee.

Ours is a country of words: Talk. Talk. Let me rest my road against a stone.

Ours is a country of words: Talk. Talk. Let me see an end to this journey.

I TALK TOO MUCH

I talk too much about the slightest nuance between women and trees,
about the earth's enchantment, about a country with no passport stamp,
I ask: *Is it true, good ladies and gentlemen, that the earth of Man is for all human beings
as you say? In that case, where is my little cottage, and where am I?*

The conference audiences applaud me for another three minutes,
three minutes of freedom and recognition.

The conference approves our right of return,
like all chickens and horses, to a dream made of stone.

I shake hands with them, one by one. I bow to them. Then I continue my journey
to another country and talk about the difference between a mirage and the rain.

I ask: *Is it true, good ladies and gentlemen, that the earth of Man is for all human beings?*

THEY WOULD LOVE TO SEE ME DEAD

They would love to see me dead, to say: *He belongs to us, he is ours.*

For twenty years I have heard their footsteps on the walls of the night.

They open no door, yet here they are now. I see three of them:

a poet, a killer, and a reader of books.

Will you have some wine? I asked.

Yes, they answered.

When do you plan to shoot me? I asked.

Take it easy, they answered.

They lined up their glasses all in a row and started singing for the people.

I asked: *When will you begin my assassination?*

Already done, they said... *Why did you send your shoes on ahead to your soul?*

So it can wander the face of the earth, I said.

The earth is wickedly dark, so why is your poem so white?

Because my heart is teeming with thirty seas, I answered.

They asked: *Why do you love French wine?*

Because I ought to love the most beautiful women, I answered.

They asked: *How would you like your death?*

Blue, like stars pouring from a window – would you like more wine?

Yes, *we'll drink,* they said.

Please take your time. I want you to kill me slowly so I can write my last

poem to my heart's wife. They laughed, and took from me

only the words dedicated to my heart's wife.

THE KINDHEARTED VILLAGERS

I did not yet know my mother's way of life,
nor her family's, when the ships came in from the sea.
I knew the scent of tobacco in my grandfather's *aba*,
and ever since I was born here, all at once, like a domestic animal,
I knew the eternal smell of coffee.

We, too, cry when we fall to the earth's rim.
Yet we don't preserve our voices in old jars.
We don't hang a mountain goat's horns on the wall,
and we don't make of our dust a kingdom.
Our dreams do not gaze upon other people's grapevines.
They don't break the rule.

My name had no feathers, so I couldn't fly beyond midday.
April's warmth was like the balalaikas of our passing visitors.
It caused us to fly like doves.
My first fright: the charm of a girl who seduced me into
smelling milk on her knees, but I fled that meal's sting!

We, too, have our mystery when the sun falls from white poplars.
We are overwhelmed by a desire to cry for one who has died for nothing,
and by an eagerness to visit Babylon or a mosque in Damascus.
In the eternal saga of pain, we are the teardrop in the dove's cooing.

We are kindhearted villagers and we don't regret our words.
Our names, like our days, are the same.
Our names don't reveal us. We infiltrate the talk of our guests.
We have things to tell the woman stranger
about the land she embroiders on her scarf

with the pinions of our returning sparrows!

When the ships came in from the sea,
this place was held together only by trees.
We were feeding our cows in their enclosures
and organizing our days in closets made by our own hands.
We were coaxing the horse, and beckoning to the wandering star.

We, too, boarded the ships, entertained by
the radiance of the emerald in our olive at night,
and by dogs barking at a fleeting moon above the church tower,
yet we were unafraid.
For our childhood had not boarded with us.
We were satisfied with a song.
Soon we'll go back to our house
when the ships unload their excess cargo.

THE OWL'S NIGHT

There is, here, a present not embraced by the past.

When we reached the last of the trees, we knew we were unable to pay attention.

And when we returned to the ships, we saw absence piling up its chosen objects
and pitching its eternal tent around us.

There is, here, a present not embraced by the past.

A silken thread is drawn out of mulberry trees
forming letters on the page of night.

Only the butterflies cast light upon our boldness
in plunging into the pit of strange words.

Was that condemned man my father?

Perhaps I can handle my life here.

Perhaps I can now give birth to myself
and choose different letters for my name.

There is, here, a present, sitting in an empty kitchen
gazing at the tracks of those crossing the river on reeds.

A present polishing the flutes with its wind.

Perhaps speech could become transparent, so we could
see open windows in it, and perhaps time could hurry along with us,
carrying our tomorrow in its luggage.

There is, here, a timeless present, and here no one can find anyone.

No one remembers how we went out the door like a gust of wind,
and at what hour we fell from yesterday, and then

yesterday shattered on the tiles

in shards for others to reassemble into mirrors
reflecting their images over ours.

There is, here, a placeless present.

Perhaps I can handle my life and cry out in the owl's night:

Was this condemned man my father who burdens me with his history?

Perhaps I will be transformed within my name, and will choose
my mother's words and way of life, exactly as they should be.

Thus, she could cajole me each time salt touched my blood,
and give me food each time a nightingale bit me in the mouth.

There is, here, a transient present.

Here, strangers hang their rifles on the olive's branches,
to prepare their dinner in haste out of tin cans
and rush hurriedly to their trucks.

A RHYME FOR THE ODES (MU'ALLAQAT)

No one guided me to myself. I am the guide.
Between desert and sea, I am my own guide to myself.
Born of language on the road to India between two small tribes,
adorned by the moonlight of ancient faiths and an impossible peace,
compelled to guard the periphery of a Persian neighborhood
and the great obsession of the Byzantines,
so that the heaviness of time lightens over the Arab's tent.
Who am I? This is a question that others ask, but has no answer.
I am my language, I am an ode, two odes, ten. This is my language.
I am my language. I am words' writ: *Be! Be my body!*
And I become an embodiment of their timbre.
I am what I have spoken to the words: *Be the place where
my body joins the eternity of the desert.
Be, so that I may become my words.*
No land on earth bears me. Only my words bear me,
a bird born from me who builds a nest in my ruins
before me, and in the rubble of the enchanting world around me.
I stood on a wind, and my long night was without end.
This is my language, a necklace of stars around the necks
of my loved ones. They emigrated.
They carried the place and emigrated, they carried time and emigrated.
They lifted their fragrances from their bowls.
They took their bleak pastures and emigrated.
They took the words. The ravaged heart left with them.
Will the echo, this echo, this white, sonorous mirage
hold a name whose hoarseness fills the unknown
and whom departure fills with divinity?
The sky opened a window for me. I looked and found nothing
save myself outside itself, as it has always been,

and me desert-haunted visions.
My steps are wind and sand, my world is my body
and what I can hold onto.
I am the traveler and also the road.
Gods appear to me and disappear.
We don't linger upon what is to come.
There is no tomorrow in this desert, save what we saw yesterday,
so let me brandish my ode to break the cycle of time,
and let there be beautiful days!
How much past tomorrow holds!
I left myself to itself, a self filled with the present.
Departure emptied me of temples.
Heaven has its own nations and wars.
I have a gazelle for a wife,
and palm trees for odes in a book of sand.
What I see is the past.
For mankind, a kingdom of dust and a crown.
Let my language overcome my hostile fate, my line of descendants.
Let it overcome me, my father, and a vanishing that won't vanish.
This is my language, my miracle, my magic wand.
This is my obelisk and the gardens of my Babylon,
my first identity, my polished metal, the desert idol of an Arab
who worships what flows from rhymes like stars in his *aba*,
and who worships his own words.

So let there be prose.
There must be a divine prose for the Prophet to triumph.

THE WELL

One cloudy day I pass by an old well.
Maybe it fills with heaven,
maybe it flows past meaning,
and the parable the old shepherd told.
I'll drink a handful of its water
and greet all the dead around it:
Peace be upon you who've remained steadfast
in puddles of butterflies!

I scrape the yellow *inula* plant from a stone.
Peace be upon you O little stone.
Maybe we were bird's wings
aching from flight.
Peace be upon you O moon
hovering above your image
but never sinking into it!

I salute the cypress:
be careful what the dust says.
Maybe we were violin strings
at the banquet of the sky's blue guardians,
maybe we were lovers' arms!

I used to walk beside myself:
be strong, O mate of mine!
Raise the past as if lifting
a goat by the horns with your bare hands.
Sit near your well.
Maybe the stags of the valley

will turn and face you.

And the voice loomed large,
your voice – petrified image –
a moment cracked open.

I have yet to complete my casual visit to oblivion.
I have yet to take all the tools of my heart with me,
my bell on the whispering winds of the pines,
my ladder propped up against heaven,
my stars at roof-height,
my hoarseness from salt-sting.

I said to memory:

Peace be upon you O grandmother's gossip,
taking us to days of pure whiteness under sleep.

My name rings like an antique gold dinar
on the edge of the well.

I hear ancestral desolation
like an 'abode of ruin'

between the calling of my name's 'mah'
and the 'mood' of its second syllable.

I shield my pet fox.

I'm sure I'll return in a matter of hours alive
from the well where I met neither Joseph
nor his brothers' fears of ricocheting echoes.

Beware!

Here next to the well's edge
your mother abandoned you
and traveled on with whispered incantations.

Do whatever you wish with yourself.

I did what I wished with *myself*:
I grew up in the shadow
between three sides of a triangle:
Egypt, Syria and Babylonia,
right here on my own,
without agrarian goddesses
(they were too busy washing pebbles
in an olive grove moist with dew).

And I stumbled onto myself
next to a snake
on a caravan journey,
and I couldn't complete anything
but my ghost.
The Land expelled me from itself.
My name pings against my steps like a horseshoe.
Come closer –
let me shuffle along in your name for a while,
from my void to your eternity,
O Gilgamesh!

Be my brother,
come with me,
we'll stop by the old well.
Like a woman, maybe it fills with heaven,
maybe it flows past meaning and becoming,
waiting for my birth
from my first well!

We'll drink a handful of its water.
We'll greet all the dead around it:

Peace be upon you

who live in puddles of butterflies,

you who are dead,

Peace be upon you.

AS HE WALKS AWAY

The enemy who drinks tea in our hovel
has a horse in smoke, a daughter with
thick eyebrows, brown eyes and long hair
braided over her shoulders
like a night of songs.

He's never without her picture
when he comes to drink our tea,
but he forgets to tell us about her nightly chores,
about a horse of ancient melodies
abandoned on a hilltop.

Relaxing in our shack, the enemy
slings his rifle over my grandfather's chair,
eats our bread like any guest,
dozes off for a while on the wicker couch.
Then, as he stoops to pat our cat on the way out,
says: *'Don't blame the victim.'*
'And who might that be?' we ask.
'Blood that won't dry in the night.'

His coat-buttons flash as he walks away.

*Good evening to you! Say hello to our well!
Say hello to our fig trees! Step gingerly
on our shadows in the barley fields
Greet our pines on high. But please
don't leave the gate open at night.
And don't forget the horse's terror of airplanes.*

And greet us there, if you have time.

That's what we want to say at the doorstep.
He hears it well enough,
but muffles it with a cough,
and waves it aside.

Then why does he visit the victim every evening,
memorize our proverbs by heart, as we do,
repeat our songs about our
special holidays in the holy place?

Our flutes would have played a duet
if it weren't for the gun.

As long as the earth turns around itself inside us
the war will not end.

Let's be good then.

He asked us to be good while we're here.

He recites Yeats's poem about the Irish Airman:

*'Those that I fight I do not hate,
Those that I guard I do not love.'*

Then he leaves our wooden ramshackle hut
and walks eighty meters to our old stone house
on the edge of the plain.

Greet our house for us, stranger.

The coffee cups are the same.

Can you smell our fingers still on them?

*Can you tell your daughter
with the braid and thick eyebrows*

*she has an absent friend
who wishes to visit her, to enter her mirror
and see his secret.*

How was she able to trace his age in this place?

*Say hello to her, if you
have time.*

What we want to tell him
he hears well enough, but muffles with a cough
and waves aside.

His coat buttons flash
as he walks away.

O HELEN, WHAT A RAIN

I met Helen on a Tuesday.
It was three o'clock, the hour of endless boredom,
but the
sound of the rain
with a woman like Helen
was a hymn to the journey.

O what a rain,
and O what longing,
the longing of heaven for itself!
And O what moaning,
the moaning of wolves for their own kind!

Rain on the roof of desiccation,
gold desiccation in the icons of churches.
The stranger says to Helen, the bread seller,
*'How far away is the earth from me, and how far away
is love from you?'*
The stranger says to Helen,
in a street as narrow as her stocking,
*'There is only a single word and the rain,
rain hungry for trees,
rain hungry for stones.'*

The stranger says to the bread seller,
*'Helen, Helen,
does the aroma of bread rise up from you now
to a balcony far off in a distant land
in place of Homer's words?'*

*Does moisture evaporate from your shoulders
through the dry trees of the poem?'*

Helen replies, *'What a rain! What a rain!'*

The stranger says to her,
*'I need narcissus to gaze in the water
the pool of your water in my body.
O Helen, gaze into the water of our dreams
and on your banks you'll hear
the dead chanting your name
O Helen, Helen,
don't leave us alone
as lonely as the moon!'*

She replies, *'What a rain! What a rain!'*

The stranger says to her,
*'I used to fight in your twin trenches –
you'll never be absolved of my Asiatic blood,
you'll never be absolved of the obscure blood
coursing through the veins of your roses!
How cruel the Greeks were at that time!
How much that wild Odysseus loved to travel,
in search of his legend!'*

What I didn't say to Helen I said,
and what I said I didn't say.

But Helen knows what the stranger leaves unsaid
and what he says to the bread

diffusing its aroma through the rain.

So she answers him:

*'The battle of Troy never happened,
never happened,
never.'*

What a rain!

What a rain!

ELEVEN PLANETS IN THE LAST ANDALUSIAN SKY

8. Be a String, Water, to My Guitar

Be a string, water, to my guitar.
Conquerors come, conquerors go...

It's getting hard to remember my face in the mirrors.
Be memory for me
so I can see what I've lost.

Who am I after these paths of exodus?
I own a boulder that bears my name
on a tall bluff overlooking what has come to an end.
Seven hundred years escort me beyond the city walls.
Time turns around in vain to save my
past from a moment that gives birth
to the history of my exile
in others and in myself.

Be a string, water, to my guitar.
Conquerors come, conquerors go...
heading south as nations decompose
on the compost of change.

I know who I was yesterday,
but who will I be tomorrow
under the Atlantic flags of Columbus?

Be a string to my guitar, water, be a string.
There is no Egypt in Egypt, no

Fez in Fez, and Syria is too far away.
No hawk on the flag of my people,
no river running east of a palm trees besieged
by the Mongols' swift horses.

In which Andalusia did I meet my end?
Here, in this place?
Or there?

I know I've died, leaving behind what is
best of what is mine in this place: my past.

I've got nothing left but my guitar.
Be a string, water, to my guitar.

Conquerors come, conquerors go.

11. Violins

Violins weep with Gypsies on their way to Andalusia,
Violins weep with Arabs leaving Andalusia.

Violins weep over lost time, no turning back.
Violins weep over a lost homeland that could possibly return.

Violins set fire to forests of that deep, deep darkness.
Violins bleed butcher knives, smell my jugular blood.

Violins weep with Gypsies on their way to Andalusia.
Violins weep with Arabs leaving Andalusia.

Violins are horses on ghostly gut-strings and keening water.
Violins are fields of wild lilacs waving to and fro.

Violins are beasts tortured by a woman's fingernail, struck once then lifted.
Violins are an army peopling a cemetery of marble and melody.

Violins are a chaos of hearts crazed by wind in a dancer's foot.
Violins are bird flocks fleeing torn banners in zigzag flight.

Violins are complaints of creased and rumpled silk in a lover's night.
Violins are the sound of wine recalling an earlier desire.

Violins follow me everywhere to exact their sad revenge.
Violins hunt me down to kill me wherever they find me.

Violins weep with Arabs leaving Andalusia.
Violins weep with Gypsies on their way to Andalusia.

WHO AM I, WITHOUT EXILE?

Stranger on the river bank,
like the river, water binds me to your name.
Nothing brings me back from this distance
to the oasis: neither war nor peace.
Nothing grants me entry into the gospels.
Nothing. Nothing shines from the shores
of ebb and flow between the Tigris and the Nile.
Nothing lifts me down from the Pharaoh's chariots.
Nothing carries me, or loads me with an idea:
neither nostalgia, nor promise.
What shall I do? What shall I do without exile
and a long night of gazing at the water?

Water binds me to your name.
Nothing takes me away from the butterflies of dream.
Nothing gives me reality: neither dust, nor fire.
What shall I do without the roses of Samarkand?
What shall I do in a square, where singers are
worn smooth by moonstones?

We have become weightless,
as light as our dwellings in distant winds.
We have, both of us, befriended the strange beings in the clouds.
We have both been freed from the gravity of the land of identity.
What shall we do?
What shall we do without exile
and long nights of gazing at the water?

Water binds me to your name.

Nothing is left of me except you.
Nothing is left of you except me –
a stranger caressing the thighs of a stranger.
O stranger, what will we do with what is left
of the stillness and the brief sleep between two myths?
Nothing carries us: neither path nor home.
Was this the same path from the beginning?
Or did our dreams find a Mongolian horse on a hill
and exchange us for him?
What shall we do?
What shall we do without exile?

FOUR PERSONAL ADDRESSES

1. One square meter of prison

It's the door, and beyond it is the paradise of the heart. Our things – and everything is ours – are interchangeable. And the door is a door, the door of metonymy, the door of legend. A door to keep September gentle. A door that invites fields to begin their wheat. The door has no door, yet I can go into my outside and love both what I see and what I do not see. All of these wonders and beauty are on earth – *there* – and yet the door has no door? My prison cell accepts no light except into myself. Peace be unto me. Peace be unto the sound barrier. I wrote ten poems to eulogize my freedom, here and there. I love the particles of sky that slip through the skylight – a meter of light where horses swim. And I love my mother's little things, the aroma of coffee in her dress when she opens the door of day to her flocks of hens. I love the fields between Autumn and Winter, the children of our prison guard, and the magazines displayed on a distant sidewalk. I also wrote twenty satiric poems about the place in which we have no plate. My freedom is not to be as they want me to be, but to enlarge my prison cell, and carry on my song of the door. A door is a door, yet I can walk out within me, and so on and so forth.

2. A seat on a train

Scarves that don't belong to us. Lovers at the last minute. The light of the station. Roses that deceive a heart in search of tenderness. Treacherous tears on the platform. Myths that don't belong to us. They traveled from *here*. Do we have a certain *there*, so that we might rejoice when we arrive? Tulips are not for us, so why should we love the railway? We travel in search of nothing, but we don't like trains when new stations are new places of exile. Lanterns, but not for us, to see our love waiting in the smoke. An express train to cross the lakes. In every pocket, keys to a house and a family photograph. All the passengers return to their families, but we do not return to any home. We travel in search of nothing, so that we may achieve the rightness of butterflies. Windows, but not for us, to exchange greetings in every language. Was the earth any clearer when we rode the horses of the past? Where are these horses? Where are the maidens of the songs? And when in us are the songs of nature? I am distant even from my own distance. How distant, then, is Love? Fast girls, like robbers, hunt us. We forget addresses scrawled on train windows. We, who fall in love for ten minutes, cannot enter a house twice. We cannot become an echo twice.

3. An intensive care room

When the earth presses against me, the wind spins me around. I have to fly, to
bridle the wind, but I am a human being. In my heart, many flutes are tearing my
breast. My sweat is like falling snow, so picture my grave in the palm of my hand,
I was, little by little, tossed into bed, I threw up and lost consciousness for a
while, and then I died. At the gate of that hurried death, I called out: *I love you,*
may I enter death in your feet? And I died, I died utterly. How tranquil and
peaceful is death without your crying? How tranquil and peaceful is death without
your hands pounding on my chest to bring me back? Before and after death I
loved you, and between I saw nothing but my mother's face.

It's the heart, set loose for a while, that has returned. I asked my beloved: *In*
which heart was I struck? She leaned on my heart and answered with tears. O
heart, how could you lie to me and let me tumble from my neighing horse? We
still have considerable time, so hold out with me until a hoopoe from the Queen of
Sheba's land comes to you.

We mailed letters. We crossed thirty seas and sixty coasts and yet we still have
time to wander.

O heart, how could you fool a horse who loves the wind? Take your time until we
finish this last embrace and fall to the earth in prayer.

Take your time that I may know whether you are my heart or her voice when she
cried out: *Take me.*

4. A room in a hotel

Peace be unto love when it comes, when it dies and changes lovers in hotels. Does it have anything to lose? We'll drink the evening coffee in the garden. We'll tell stories of exile in the night. Then we'll go to a room – two strangers searching for a night of compassion and so on and so forth.

We'll leave a few words on our two seats. We'll forget our cigarettes, so others may continue with the evening and the smoking. We'll forget some of our sleep on our pillows, so others may come and rest in our sleep and so on and so forth. How was it that we put faith in our bodies in those hotels? How could we depend on our secrets in those hotels? In the darkness that has joined our bodies, others may continue our cry and so on and so forth. We are only two of those who sleep in a public bed, a bed that belongs to all. We say only what transient lovers also said a while ago. Goodbye comes soon. Was this hasty encounter only so as to forget those who loved us in other hotels? Have you not said these wanton words to someone else? Have I not said these wanton words to someone else in another hotel, or have I said them in this very bed? We'll follow the same steps, so that others may come and follow the same steps and so on and so forth.

LESSON FROM THE KAMA SUTRA

Wait for her with an azure cup.

Wait for her in the evening at the spring, among perfumed roses.

Wait for her with the patience of a horse trained for mountains.

Wait for her with the distinctive, aesthetic taste of a prince.

Wait for her with seven pillows of cloud.

Wait for her with strands of womanly incense wafting.

Wait for her with the manly scent of sandalwood on horseback.

Wait for her and do not rush.

If she arrives late, wait for her.

If she arrives early, wait for her.

Do not frighten the birds in her braided hair.

Wait for her to sit in a garden at the peak of its flowering.

Wait for her so that she may breathe this air, so strange to her heart.

Wait for her to lift her garment from her leg, cloud by cloud.

And wait for her.

Take her to the balcony to watch the moon drowning in milk.

Wait for her and offer her water before wine.

Do not glance at the twin partridges sleeping on her chest.

Wait and gently touch her hand as she sets a cup on marble.

As if you are carrying the dew for her, wait.

Speak to her as a flute would to a frightened violin string,

as if you knew what tomorrow would bring.

Wait, and polish the night for her ring by ring.

Wait for her until Night speaks to you thus:

There is no one alive but the two of you.

So take her gently to the death you so desire,

and wait.